Ethical Dilemma of the Digital Divide in the Threshold of Social Inequalities in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Despite the ubiquitous nature of the internet in our daily lives today, the digital divide discourse in Africa highlights the inequitable social distribution of ICT access. The failure to have equitable social access to ICT tools, or a lack of skills to operate them, clearly depicts a technological predicament and a metaphor that questions the social gaps between humans that can access and use the web, and those that cannot. Relying on content analysis of extensive literature on the digital divide, this paper explores the notion of digital divide social inequalities in Africa, especially as it concerns how it should be understood, valued and managed. Findings, reveals that though the new information technologies are rapidly changing lives of a small but growing number of people across Africa, decisions on content, knowledge and participation excludes Africans. The digital divide therefore, has the potential to create, perpetuate and exacerbate morally objectionable conditions that can replicate poverty, construct exclusion and foregrounds social inequality in many African societies.

INTRODUCTION

The expanding use of digital technology within economic, political, social and cultural life on a worldwide scale is generating some concerns about the emergence of new form of inequalities and the duplication of existing inequalities among societies (Wyatt et al., 2000). These developments, nonetheless, are part of rapid social change, which is ushering in a digital society (Webster, 2004). This explains why some scholars, analysts and theorist of the network society have argued that the global information revolution underpinning online movement and networked society is generating increasingly fragmented and unequal societies (Fuchs, 2008). This argument’s corollary depicts the notion of digital divide which is inevitably tied to the sociological concept of social inequalities in the society and like any other form of deprivation

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can be described as a pressing humanitarian issue (Van Dijk, 2005). That clearly explain why the issue of global inequality is connected to the topic of the digital divide because technology is one aspect of material wealth and wealth production is more and more based on technology and knowledge. In this regard, Africa is of particular importance here because it is the most marginalized and excluded region of the world. According to the United Nation Human Development Report, Africa, especially the Sub-Saharan Africa is the least developed region of the world in terms of life expectancy, school enrolment ratio, income and undernourishment (UNHDR, 2005). Africa is said to have the fewest telephone lines, radios, television sets, computers and Internet users of any other part of the world. These tools, which are used to package and transmit information and knowledge, are broadly referred to as information and communications technologies (ICTs). The gap between those with access to ICTs and those without is generally referred to as the “digital divide.” It is most extreme in Africa, where in 2001, out of 800 million people, only 1 in 4 had a radio, 1 in 13 a television set, 1 in 40 a telephone and 1 out of 130 a computer. The divide widens in Africa’s countryside, where a lack of roads, telephone lines and electricity separates the rural majority from their urban counterparts. The digital gap therefore, brings with it a danger of isolating certain people from the benefits of information and communication technologies, especially those in Africa.

However, the exponential growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the transformation that this has wrought in all aspects of everyday life has resulted in the emergence of a broad spectrum of problems culminating into social exclusion and digital inequality (Braman, 2006). Additionally, it includes the rapidly evolving threat landscape of the cyberspace which has heightened the extent to which cyberspace vulnerabilities and limited capacities prevent Africa from maximising the benefits of the digital economy (Fox, 2005). Besides, the people are facing a growing number of uncertainties related to the use of the digital environment such as the digital security threats and incidents that have increased the financial, privacy, and reputational consequences, and in some cases produce physical damages. Although stakeholders are increasingly aware of these challenges raised by digital security risk, they often approach the problem only from the technical perspective, and in a manner that tends to play down on the ethical implications of the social cleavages in digital utilization and applications. That however, accompany information poverty and insecurity challenges emanating from the digital divide phenomenon. Nonetheless, scholarly investigation into the consequences of uneven technological diffusion for social inequality and exclusion has regrettably been modest and disproportionate. This polysomic socio-ethical condition have a profoundly contentious security and socio-ethical implications for Africa that is most dramatic and urgent. It threatens not only the future growth and development of Africa, but has serious security implications both for the continent and the entire world. It is therefore a risk to the national, regional, international as well as the human security.

But despite the seeming pessimism of this development, the rhetoric of the discourse concerning the emerging pattern of cyber activity in Africa today reveals that the digital divide is not only a technological predicament; it is also an ethical crisis. This is so because the cyber security divide and processes are redefining security in the 21st century (Massumi, 2007). This study therefore examines some of the numerous challenges posed by unaffordable access of information technology to several sections of African communities. It posits that lack of access to information leads to social inequalities and questions the information economy that generates consequences for social divisions, social insecurity, diversity and differences among the already dichotomized African society. The digital divide phenomenon from an African perspective, mirrors the already existing social inequalities and widens the social division that has simply become more apparent with the expansion of the ICTs.
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